

**Opening Remarks**

**for**

**U.S. Transportation Secretary  
Ray LaHood**

**Distracted Driving Summit**

**Sept. 30, 2009**

We're here today to deal with a very, very serious problem.

To put it plainly, distracted driving is a menace to society.

And it seems to be getting worse every year.

This trend distresses me deeply, both on a personal level, and as the nation's chief executive for transportation safety.

Today, we're kicking off a two-day summit that's going to look at this deadly epidemic from every angle.

We're bringing together top experts in safety, transportation research, regulatory affairs, and law enforcement to help us identify, target, and tackle the fundamental elements of this problem.

We're including a panel of teens and young adults, because we think their perspective and their ideas are key to changing the behavior of their peers.

Every single time you take your eyes off the road or talk on the phone while you're driving – even for just a few seconds – you put your life in danger.

And you put others in danger too.

This kind of behavior is irresponsible – and the consequences are devastating.

I met this morning with several men and women who have suffered as a result of accidents caused by distracted driving.

They asked to participate in today's summit, to share their stories, and remind everyone what's at stake.

I'd like them to stand and be recognized.

Thank you for your courage in coming here today.

With your permission, I'll describe some of your experiences.

Greg Zaffke from Chicago lost his mother when a driver who was painting her nails said she never saw the red light at the intersection. Greg has formed a group called the Black Nail Brigade, which is working to end distracted driving.

Jennifer Smith's mother, Linda Doyle, was killed in Oklahoma City about a year ago by a teenage driver.

The driver was going 45 miles an hour while talking on a cell phone.

And Kim Laghary and her daughter Haley lost a husband and father when a distracted driver swerved suddenly, crossed lanes, and hit Mr. Laghary's truck.

To each of you, and the other survivors here today who were injured or lost a loved one --

Cheryle Adams from Washington, D.C.,

and Dave and Judy Teater from Grand Rapids, Michigan --

thank you for participating.

The trauma these people lived through is just the tip of the iceberg.

Our latest research finds that nearly 6,000 people died last year in crashes involving a distracted or inattentive driver, and more than half a million were injured.

On any given day last year, more than 800,000 vehicles were driven by someone using a hand-held cell phone during the day.

The worst offenders are the youngest, least experienced drivers – men and women under 20.

Teenage drivers, in particular, are already at greater risk for getting into an accident than other drivers.

On top of that, the research shows that teen drivers are likelier to sustain severe injuries in a crash if they're distracted by a cell phone.

Across the board, federal researchers who have directly observed drivers of all ages found that more and more people are using a variety of hand-held devices while driving – not just cell phones, but also iPods, video games, Blackberrys, and so forth.

They're doing it every day of the week, in the rain, and with kids in the car.

And we know this problem isn't limited to private citizens.

Incredibly, bus drivers, train operators, truck drivers, and even school bus drivers have allowed distractions to interfere with their work.

A year ago, a commuter train engineer in Chatsworth, California was so busy texting a friend that he failed to stop at a red signal. He caused one of the worst passenger rail accidents in years, killing 25 people and injuring 135 more.

In July, a 25 year-old tow truck driver in upstate New York was texting and talking. He crashed through a fence, side-swiped a house, landed in a swimming pool, and injured his passenger.

A generation ago, our society often turned a blind eye to people who would drink and drive, or not use a seatbelt, or maybe both.

Those problems taught us a valuable lesson: We need a combination of strong laws, tough enforcement, and ongoing public education, to make a difference.

Fortunately, though this problem is still widespread, there is a growing willingness to take action.

Many advocacy groups and insurance companies like State Farm are getting the message out and educating people about distracted driving.

The wireless and electronics industries are also beginning to take this seriously, as they try to make their devices safer to use.

This year, more than 200 distracted driving bills have been introduced in 46 state legislatures.

Incidentally, I'm proud of my home state, Illinois, for adopting this summer a ban on texting while driving.

So far, 21 states and the District of Columbia ban cell phones for novice drivers.

And 6 states and D.C. ban cell phone use by all drivers.

This is a good start, but there is much more we need to do, and tomorrow I will announce some of the actions we're taking at the federal level to deal with this.

In the meantime, I want to remind everyone that we cannot rely on legal action alone, because in reality, you can't legislate behavior.

And there aren't enough police on patrol to catch everyone who's breaking the law.

Taking personal responsibility for our actions is the key to all of this.

Research shows that your chances of a crash multiply when you dial your phone or text while driving – so keep your eyes on the road.

It's up to each of us to do that.

Don't wait for your employer to tell you not to text or talk on company time.

Don't wait for your community to pass a law.

And parents, it's up to you to help your teenage drivers understand the risks involved.

Two studies released this week found that teens are far less likely to use a cell phone when they drive if their parents set clear rules up front.

This isn't an issue that affects just one area of the country, or one segment of the population.

This affects everybody who gets into a vehicle, day or night.

We're in this together, as a nation, and we've got to solve it together.

Later this afternoon, I'm going come back here to find out what the group has accomplished, and what their next steps will be.

We're not here simply to study this problem – we're here to come up with solutions.

I'm hopeful that the work we're beginning today will make all of us – and our loved ones – much safer on the road, in the months and years to come.

Thank you.